

DON'T LEAVE A BLOT – BOARD AND CARD GAMES, VIOLATIONS OF BOUNDARIES AND UNRULY BEHAVIOUR IN ARDEN OF FAVERSHAM (1592), A WOMAN KILLED WITH KINDNESS (1603) AND THE TWO ANGRY WOMEN OF ABINGTON (1598) – PART I

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Fig. 1 Arden of Faversham. Frontispiece to the 1633 Quarto.

Games formed an integral part of early modern everyday life. In the 16th and 17th century numerous books on games were published, among them encyclopaedic overviews, handbooks on particular games, and game manuals like Francis Willughby's *Book of Games* (1672). The spread of the new printing technologies promoted the distribution of books on games and of game equipment, because it had become much cheaper to produce cards and game boards. More people could afford to buy games, and the books that were brought on the market introduced the games to large parts of the population. Despite its popularity among all social groups, game playing as such was often critically examined in conduct books, or in treatises that were explicitly concerned with the perils and vices lurking in allegedly harmless pastimes.¹

The sheer range of games and sports in the late 16th and 17th century is stunning. Shakespeare alone mentions nearly fifty different games and sports in his plays.² Comparatively few games, however, are acted out on stage; most of these games are merely briefly mentioned, only allud-

ed to, or they serve as metaphor or simile. The references to games give evidence to the fact that the playgoers were familiar with a broad variety of different parlour games, and with their technical language. It is not without good reason that only few sedentary games are played "on the boards". Board games are difficult to stage. In contrast to athletic activities or hunting³, a board or a card game is a static element: The actors take their seats, and they usually stay put during the match. The early modern playgoers must have held their breaths at the sight of the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes (V.ii), and eight of Shakespeare's plays include hunting scenes or episodes, but it might have been rather dull for a contemporary theatregoer to witness a long match of chess between Macbeth and Duncan, or a game of tables between Iago and Othello. We have to keep in mind that the spectatorial experience differed in many respects from modern theatregoing. The actors constantly had to hold the audience's attention. The playgoers talked and moved around, they left their seats during the plays to get refreshments, or relieve their bladders.

Moreover, most of the theatre visitors were so far removed from the stage that they could not follow the movement of the pieces on the board.⁴ And yet, there are quite a few plays, in which at least a part of a game of dice, a board or card game is acted out on stage. Critics have drawn attention to the significance of game scenes on the Elizabethan and Early Stuart stage already in the 1950s, and they examined the dramatic conventions linked with these games.⁵ They have abstained, however, from a more detailed analysis of the functions of the game scenes. Until recently, games on stage have received only little serious critical attention with the exception of chess. Some studies embedded the game scenes into the broader context of contemporary non-literary discourses, and they also shed new light on the performance aspects of these games.⁶ One result of these studies on games in early modern theatres is that many plays, in which the game scenes play a decisive role in creating an atmosphere, in depicting characters and conflicts, and in moving the plot forward or bringing it to a climax, share a common genre: the domestic drama.

This article begins in this edition of *Caissa* with a brief overview over different functions of board games in this particular and short-lived genre. Domestic drama aims at offering a realistic portrayal of early modern middle class households, an accurate reflection of day-to-day reality,⁷ and critics have drawn attention to the material culture presented on stage with particular regard to household spaces, furniture and food.⁸ As games were an integral part of everyday life, they are important in their material quality as stage properties.⁹ They create a sense of the domestic.¹⁰ Games can also be seen as paraphernalia of social rituals, and in this quality they can be linked to contemporary discourses on aspects of early modern households, on gender roles, on private and public spheres, on social institutions like friendship, on virtues such as hospitality and civility, but also to broader topics like social mobility. In the second part, I would like to tie up on the research on dramatic conventions of different games. Different games trigger different associations; they are invested with symbolism, and highly charged with cultural connotations. Game-playing as such was judged ambivalently, some games were regarded as more harmful than others. This part of the article also includes an overview over the anxieties connected with game playing and gambling as such. The main focus will then be laid on the game of tables, later in the 17th century known as Backgammon (1647, OED). The contemporary analogy between the game and life of man allows for an extensive exploitation on stage, as it will be shown in my first case study, the domestic tragedy *Arden of Feversham* (1592).¹¹ The game scene in this play has recently attracted some academic attention, just as the game of cards in *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1603), which will also be briefly addressed in the second part of the article, which will be published in the 5th edition of *Caissa* in spring 2018. Leaving the ground at least partially covered, I would then like to take a closer look in the last case study at a much-neglected domestic comedy, Henry Porter's *The Two Angry Women of Abington* (1598). I would like to argue that the game scenes in the domestic drama fulfil an important

function by depicting characters and conflicts. The games emblemize the play's main concerns. Card and board games are almost exclusively used to show transgressions; a feature they have in common with staged banquets. The games mirror the condition of the *domus* as such: the boundaries of the household can thus be paralleled with the boundaries of the game. The fears and anxieties with regard to the household, and to the behaviour of its inhabitants as well as all vices that are associated with game playing as such are brought on stage, and the social ritual of game playing that is intended to establish or confirm order, creates the opposite effect and causes disorder.

Games: Paraphernalia of the early modern household

Domestic drama was a rather short-lived genre that flourished between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹² The genre is not easy to define,¹³ the common denominator is that it is “set within and dealing with issues proper to the household, and treating the actions of those of less than noble birth.”¹⁴ Several recurrent themes and *topoi* can be discerned in these plays: violation of the requirements of *pietas* to-

wards parents, disobedience of servants, marital strife, the shrew wife, the scold, adultery, and finally the most extreme consequence of domestic disorder: mariticide, uxoricide or, infanticide.¹⁵ The plays bring contemporary cultural anxieties with regard to the domestic order on stage.¹⁶ Some critics have emphasized the didactic purpose of the genre, and argued that domestic plays, and in particular domestic tragedies, were “lessons of morality and religious faith”,¹⁷ and meant “to alert their audiences to the consequences of immoral actions within the home.”¹⁸ Domestic tragedies are often based on real stories of murder and adultery the audience might have been familiar with through pamphlets or ballads.¹⁹ The plays hover between realist thrillers and morality plays.²⁰ They were extremely popular, and the concentration on affairs of the private households satisfies the desires “...to see through walls, to discover the intimate secrets of conjugal relationships, to identify disorder, and to imagine that in this way it is mastered, to participate in a communal restoration of the preferred order of domestic things.”²¹ The realistic atmosphere of these plays is created by the portrayal of daily routines and rituals that were practiced in early modern households. Meals like breakfast,



Fig. 2 Handbook for the arcane 'philosopher's game' by Ralph Lever, 1563.

supper and dinner are often staged, and so are festivities like weddings. As integral part of everyday culture, games are also mentioned, or even acted out on stage. These games go beyond a mere activity with the purpose of killing time just as meals have a deeper meaning than satisfying hunger. They are bonding measures between friends and neighbours, they constitute or re-establish friendship, and they are offered among other entertainments by the host in order to demonstrate his hospitality. Furthermore, engagement in leisurely games gives the scene a notion of prosperity and gentility.²² Particularly new members of the upper middle classes, the so called *new men*, used different forms of entertainment to confirm their social status by showing that they now had the time to engage in these pastimes like hunting, sports, or games. „At the outset, the plots create an atmosphere suggestive of English civility and prosperity. They do so by setting scenes in spaces that in the sixteenth and seventeenth century became indicative of social status among the gentry and yeomanry: libraries, studies, closets (small, wooden-panelled rooms), kitchens, dining rooms, bedrooms, gardens. Stage properties include a variety of household effects (stools, beds, salters, card tables, and so on) further typifying status and comfort.”²³

The focus on the domestic and on the household on stage corresponds with the emergence and the wide distribution of other texts focussing domestic life in England at the end of the sixteenth century: homilies, household manuals and advice literature, containing rules and regulations concerning the proper behaviour of the household members.²⁴

The extra-theatrical texts and the plays mutually influence each other. Three core virtues that are in the focus of these plays are nobility, loyalty and civility, displayed by hospitality, cultivation of friendships, maintenance of order, and proper behaviour and speech.

Comensoli regards the cult of hospitality as the fundamental *topos* of domestic drama.²⁵ The display of hospitality was not only a Christian duty, especially towards the socially disadvantaged (“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby

some have entertained angels unawares” (AV, Hebrews 13:2)), but also a social obligation.²⁶ In the first scene of the *Late Lancashire Witches* (1634) Master Arthur, Master Bantam and Master Shakestone, who return from an unsuccessful rabbit hunt, discuss where they would dine the same evening. Their choice had fallen on a wealthy landowner with the telling name Master Generous, “And where a loving welcome is presum’d,/ Whose liberall Table’s never unprepar’d/Nor he of guests unfurnisht.” (I.i. 54-56). His ability to entertain his guests confirms his status as gentleman, and he is associated with nobility (I.i.65). The entertainment offered by the generous gentleman is contrasted with the catastrophic wedding feast in the topsy-turvy Seely household in the first scene of the third act.

Comensoli argues: “The ritual of hospitality is a coded language, its purpose being to express the householder’s inherent nobility... Nobility is no longer strictly a matter of class; it is a virtue practiced by gentlemen of innate distinction.”²⁷ Hospitality entails risks. The ideal of the open-door policy of early modern households (“porta patens esto, nulli clauderis honesto”²⁸) makes the domus vulnerable, and many domestic plays discuss anxieties about potential abuse of hospitality and friendship. Homicide in the domestic tragedy *Two Lamentable Tragedies* alluringly demands in the first scene: “Mistrust me not, I am thy faithful friend”, but Avarice retorts: “Many say so that prove false in the end.” Games were played to establish, to confirm, or re-affirm friendship, like the games in *Arden of Feversham* (1592) or *Woman Killed With Kindness* (1603), or in the very first scene of *Two Angry Women of Abington* (1598).

Civility was synonymous with orderly and accommodating manners; it refers to speech and proper behaviour.²⁹ Comensoli underlines the importance of civility, and contends: „The locus in quo of transgression is the patriarchal household, and tragic suffering arises from the protagonists’ inability to abide by social codes governing civility and domestic hierarchy.”³⁰ The domestic hierarchy is unhinged and turned upside down when the master cannot maintain his authority towards his servants or his wife. All three game scenes in the

domestic dramas chosen as case studies present such blurring or even reversal of the traditional order.

Next to loss of money, one of the possible dangers inherent to games was loss of temper. “When I am in game, I am furious; came my/ mother’s eyes in my way, I would not lose a fair end. No, were/ she alive, but with one tooth in her head, I should venture the / striking out of that. I think of nobody when I am in play, I am / so earnest”, Ward confesses in Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* (1623-4) (I.ii.98-101). Burton tells the tale of William the Conqueror smashing his chess board over a French prince’s head;³¹ the risk is nevertheless higher with games of luck, such as tables. Erasmus states: “If a person is prone to deceit, dishonesty, quarrelling, anger, violence, or arrogance, it is here that such flaws in his nature come to light.”²³ Games therefore provide an ideal opportunity to depict a character.

A game with cultural connotations – Chess and dice games

“Playes may bee divided either into those that exercise the body, as Tennis, Stowball &c., or those that exercise the wit as Chests, Tables, Cards &c. Those that have nothing of chance, as Chest &c.; those that altogether depend upon fortune, as Inne & In, Crosse & Pile & Thirtie, or those that have art & skill both, as most games at Cards & Tables.”³³ Francis Willughby’s encyclopaedic *Book of Games* was posthumously published in 1672. His substantial treatment of games, their terminology, their rules and equipment, containing information on origins and significance, as well as on ways to cheat – although unfinished and in parts incomplete – provides an unparalleled insight into the world of Early Modern gaming.³⁴ The most important distinguishing criterion was whether games depended on chance or skill, and the moral assessment of games was based on this distinction.³⁵ While chess was generally regarded as a highly recommendable pastime activity, games of pure chance were often condemned, or even subject to legal regulations and generally considered harmful, in stark contrast to their popularity and prevalence. Age states in John North-

brooke's *Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes* (1577): "Of all games (wherein is no bodily exercise) it is most to be commended, for it is a wise play (and therefore was named the philosophers' game) for in it there is no deceyte or guyle, the witte thereby is made more sharpe, and the remembrance quickened, and therefore maybe vused moderately."³⁶ One of the principal dangers of dicing was cheating. Chess is a game of perfect information, and it is almost impossible to cheat, unless a player's attention is drawn from the board, and his opponent moves the pieces to his advantage undetected. It is described as compound and intricate,³⁷ and therefore considered beneficial. Chess was regarded as a courtly, aristocratic entertainment. The rules were and are comparably complicated, and the equipment was expensive, and often artistically designed. The technical language of the game plays on war and domination. "It was a metaphorical enactment of war that turned the 'art of war' into an intellectual exercise whose outcome excluded chance – which appealed to the political elites."³⁸

The only direct reference to this 'noblest game of all'³⁹ in Shakespeare is found in the final act of *The Tempest*,⁴⁰ when Prospero discovers Ferdinand and Miranda playing a game of chess (V.i.171). "Here Prospero discovers FERDINAND and MIRANDA playing at chess.

Mir. Sweet lord, you play me false. /

Fer. No, my dear'st love, / I would not for the world.

Mir. Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle, / And I would call it fair play.

Alon: If this prove. A vision of the Island, one dear son / Shall I twice lose.

Seb. A most high miracle!

This puzzling scene, in which Miranda accuses Ferdinand in this "game of perfect information" of playing false, has received much critical attention. The cultural connotations of chess as intellectually challenging and civilized game, in which Miranda has been instructed by Prospero on the remote island, and of chess as aristocratic and fitting pastime of the royal couple-to-be, which are predominant in non-literary sources, are existent, but these aspects do



Fig. 3. Jan Steen (1626-1679). *Argument over a card game*. Dutch genre painting.

not cover the range of connotations of the game of chess in Early Modern Drama. There might also be sexual innuendo in this scene.⁴¹ Schmidgall regards it as an innocent and most appropriate activity for the two young people. "The sight of the two young lovers engaged at chess, then, helped Shakespeare to evoke the sense of a marriage of true minds..."⁴² Poole, however, based on a very careful analysis of contemporary connotations of chess, convincingly argues for sexual overtones, and concludes that the wager can only be Miranda's virginity.⁴³ He compares this scene to the strategies of other plays, for example Massinger's and Fletcher's *The Spanish Curat* (1622) and Ford's *Love Sacrifice* (1633), and concludes that chess scenes are often highly sexualized, that the game "registers and supplies metaphors for these off-board activities" and that they play on a war between the sexes.⁴⁴ Solem, in his pioneering study of Elizabethan game scenes, comes to a similar conclusion. "... in all but one of the instances where Chess is required for the staging of Elizabethan drama, it is in conjunction with a love scene, or a scene which involves cuckolding."⁴⁵ Chess as art of war exercised on the board, opened up possibilities to stage the art of love, or the war of sexes on the board, however playful and non-aggressive this conquest on the board might be. The chess

scene in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1623-4) (a play that begins as a domestic tragedy in a domestic setting, and then undergoes a genre shift) differs from the more harmless chess love scenes (II.ii). In the chess scene the widow Livia distracts Bianca's mother in law with a game of chess, while Bianca is being raped by the Duke of Florence.⁴⁶

A dramatic convention was established, picking up on the cultural connotations of the game, stripping it off to some extent from the general association of the philosopher's sport, and combining it with the literary tradition of the conquest, and the poetic analogy between love and war. "Dramatically, Chess seems not a royal game requiring skill and intelligence, but a metaphor, a conceit, a conventional play on various aspects of love through the terminology of chess."⁴⁷

Games of dice, in which often large sums were wagered, range at the other end of the moral scale. There is no intellectual benefit to be gained from a mere game of chance, and the risk of losing a large amount of money endangered the whole family. Furthermore, dicing was linked with other transgressions such as "...swearing, wrangling, drinking, loss of time, and such inconveniences, which are ordinary concomitants."⁴⁸ In short: Dice inevitably equals vice. Age in Northbrooke's *Treatise against Dicing*,